

## An analysis of reported bullying at school within NFER attitude surveys

In a 2011 study, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in the UK explored the different manifestations of bullying in almost 100 secondary schools and, through pupil participation, was able to reveal interesting findings about which kinds of bullying tactics inflict the greatest emotional distress. More than 35,000 pupils between the ages of 11 and 17 were involved in this study.

The emotional consequences of six different types of bullying tactics were analysed in this report: (1) verbal (2) physical (3) theft/ damage to property (4) racism (5) unwanted sexual contact (6) cyber bullying. Pupils who had been bullied were then asked to evaluate, using a 4-point scale, how often they felt: happy, sad or upset, depressed, stressed or anxious, positive.

A staggering 44% of pupils reported experiencing bullying in school at some time during the preceding year. Pupils were also asked questions about why, in their opinion, they had been bullied and were invited to undertake a self-assessed emotional well-being questionnaire. Almost  $\frac{1}{3}$  of pupils between the ages of 11 and 15 have experienced verbal abuse, making this the most commonly experienced type of bullying. Further, the findings unequivocally indicate that the most emotionally harmful type of bullying happens when pupils are 'left out' or excluded from social groups.

This research challenges the famous adage that 'sticks and stones may break my bones but words cannot hurt me'. Greater emotional harm is caused by social isolation and verbal abuse than, for example, physical abuse. Accordingly, the report ends with an imploring tone and encourages both teachers and parents alike not to underestimate the insidious consequences of psychological bullying on children's well-being.

Results were analysed on an age and gender basis. The report concludes that while exclusion bullying is more common for girls than boys, the emotional effects of being 'left out' are even more detrimental for boys. More research is needed to determine exactly why this is the case. However, analysts speculate that boy's friendship groups are typically larger than those of girls and, hence, exclusion from larger groups infringes the prospects of socialization. For girls, unwanted sexual contact, though the least common type of bullying, results in the most negative emotional impact.

The report encourages both schools and parents to take more seriously 'exclusion' type bullying. Exclusion bullying may be harder to detect than other forms (e.g. physical abuse). Accordingly, it may go unnoticed for a comparatively long period by which time severe emotional harm might already have been caused. While the report applauds school initiatives already in place to prevent social exclusion there is an acknowledgement of the difficulties involved with implementing an effective strategy to extirpate this form of bullying altogether.

This NFER emphasizes the importance of tackling psychologically abusive bullying strategies in schools. Contextualization of these findings would have been enhanced if the NFER had stipulated the kinds of schools they had worked in: private/ state, boarding/ day, religious/ secular etc. More nuanced results may come from such particularized research.